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ABSTRACT

The author speculates on some of the reasons why journalists are not getting through to as many teachers as they should and suggests some solutions to the problem, with particular emphasis on reaching the teacher of the exceptional child. Shortcomings of educational journals are noted to involve content and presentation. Eliminating jargon is one of the suggestions offered for improving educational journal readability. (SBH)

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JOURNALS AND TEACHERS---

ARE WE GETTING THROUGH?

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JOURNALS AND TEACHERS - Are we getting through?

The short answer is 'No' - not often enough, not clearly enough, not to sufficient of those who are probably most in need of knowing.

What I should like to do is to give some evidence for my feeling that we are not getting through to as many teachers as we should, to speculate on some of the reasons and to suggest some solutions.

First of all, some evidence. Education Readership, a survey carried out among teaching staff in England and Wales for The Times Educational Supplement and published this year, indicates that only one in two of all primary and secondary school teachers reads the weekly Times Educational Supplement - and perhaps only 20% buy it - while only about 9% of teachers may see the monthly journal, Junior Education, which is mainly concerned with eight to 13 year olds.

Nor do the figures for journals on exceptional children give us any reason to be complacent. Many, both in Britain and overseas, appear to be subscribed to by only about 40% or less of their potential readership and a survey published by the Institute for Research into Mental and Multiple Handicap in London last year (Parfit, 1977) supports this impression although - it should be added - doctors, therapists and health visitors didn't come out any better. It is, of course, possible as the survey and experience with our own journal suggests, that many more - perhaps half as many again - read other teachers' copies, either sometimes or regularly.

However, this still appears to leave a sizeable group of non-readers. Why should this be? One diagnosis of the non-reader might be 'selective dyslexia' - over-exposure to school text books during the day so that only Muriel Spark or Neville Shute are acceptable reading at night. Another

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possibility is that, paradoxically, in the past, teaching methods and uninspiring text books may, with the best intentions in the world, have contributed to an anti-reading climate in the general public which has rubbed off on subsequent generations of teachers themselves.

But I should like to concentrate not on these speculations but on what may be the shortcomings of the journals themselves. Firstly, in terms of content; secondly, in presentation. In doing so I must stress that I am speaking personally as an editor and am not necessarily representing the views either of my colleagues, the honorary editors, or of the National Council for Special Education, which publishes the journal I edit.

First, content. The content may for instance appear

- (a) too obvious: like the finding I came across recently that children whose mealtimes are 'a time of total family interaction' have higher average ability and reading ages than children who are not allowed to talk when they eat. What would be news would be if it were the other way round (and what a relief to all of us well-intentioned parents who feel compelled to punctuate mouthfuls of roast chicken with edifying remarks about the state of the economy or the need to conserve the world's natural resources).
- (b) the content may appear too remote from the here-and-now of classroom teaching because it is too abstract, too theoretical, too focussed on unrelated research. One example might be a paper entitled 'Interim thoughts on the role of transcendental meditation in the cultural development of the pre-school paraplegic' - though I hasten to add that I haven't come across that one yet.

(c) the content may appear too challenging - a stab in the back of those who have uncritically clung to outdated practices and attitudes.

The difficulty is, of course, that teachers are no more homogeneous a group than, say, insurance brokers or poultry farmers. The content of practically any educational journal falls short of some of its readers some of the time.

The problem is one of balance. In our journal recently (December 1977) we published a rough analysis of the content of the first four years' volumes and invited comments. [The analysis showed that about one-third of the main articles were about practical methods and materials, a sixth or slightly more described educational provisions such as special units in ordinary schools, another sixth were devoted to reviews of research and individual research studies and slightly less than one-sixth were on topical themes like the Government's plans for the integration of handicapped children in ordinary schools.] An absence of brickbats suggested that the balance may be about right for our present readership. What seemed clear from readers' reactions is that their main demand is for more information about classroom practice and for articles on research and theory which draw out the implications for teachers in a readable way.

This leads me on to presentation. This, I think, may often be the more acute shortcoming because what seems too dull, too theoretical, too research-oriented, appears so because it is not put over in the right way. The success of television programmes based on minority appeal material such as archaeology, shows how care and imaginative presentation can widen the appeal. Presentation itself divides into a number of sub-headings but let's consider two - written style and typographical design.

First, style. Why do we clutter our sentences with three-syllable words when a monosyllable might do instead, use a jargonistic circumlocution when a simple word or phrase would suffice, add words which needn't be there at all? As I edit articles for our journal I have a vision of an educationalist - why not a teacher? - plodding through the field of special education with a case in one hand - why not a child? - orientating himself towards the classroom situation - and serve him right if he gets his feet wet in the process...

Just two recent examples come to mind: children with a 'positive play attitude towards water' - I think what the writer meant was that they enjoyed water play. Another: 'early childhood is a period of maximum plasticity.' I suppose the writer meant that children are at their most impressionable in their earliest years - or could he have been trying to say that two year olds handle more plastic objects than at any other time in their lives?

Why do we resort to jargon? There could be many reasons. Sir Ernest Gowers suggests three in his guide to the use of English called Plain Words (1948) where he christens it 'pudder.' It seems, he says, 'to be a morbid condition contracted in early manhood' to which, he suspects, psychologists are especially prone. One reason, he suggests, is that when young we feel the lure of 'rippling or reverberating polysyllables' and far fetched words which we assume will give distinction to what we write and - he might have added - some of us never grow up.

Another reason is laziness. A string of jargon may hinder clear thinking or hide the fact that there is no thinking at all. A third reason that he suggests is the instinct for self preservation. He quotes

Cardinal Newman as saying 'Mistiness is the mother of safety' - in other words, statements that are vague and imprecise are less likely to rebound on you.

A further reason, I should like to offer, is the feeling that an armoury of jargon which is incomprehensible to the outsider will help establish our professional identity and lend a spurious respectability to what may be trivial or unsound.

Jargon words are often polysyllabic. The more polysyllables in a sentence the more difficult it is to understand the text and the less readable it becomes. Has anyone tried applying the Fog Index to educational journals? Gunning's index, published in 1952, assesses readability by relating the numbers of long words to sentence length. Applying the index to three overseas journals on special education and three British ones I found that the Fog Index for the overseas sample ranged from 21 to 26. The British ones, from only 14 to 23, came out rather better. Incidentally, in case anyone should be wondering, the Fog Index of the paper I'm giving now is possibly about 12.8, which according to Gilliland (1972) in his book Readability puts me half way between the Plowden Report on primary schools and Enid Blyton's children's book, *The Valley of Adventure*.

Another formula for assessing readability, by the way, is called the SMOG grading (and SMOG stands for Simple Measure of Gobbledygook). It was devised by McLaughlin (1969).

Educational journals like many other journals, also suffer from long sentences as well as long words - sentences festooned with subordinate clauses like an overdressed Christmas tree. I don't know if anyone has

invented a formula for assessing readability on the basis of the average number of complex sentences in a passage of given length but - influenced, perhaps, by the SMOG grading and the Fog Index - I tend to think of them as 'pea soupers.'

There are, of course, other aspects of written style which affect the readability of educational journals. These include, for instance, the ratio of familiar to unfamiliar words, concrete to abstract, personal to impersonal, Latin to Anglo-Saxon, all mentioned by Klare in the Measurement of Readability (1958), and also the number of circumlocutions and the length of paragraphs.

I should like now to say something about typographical design. However good the content and written style, a journal can be marred by its design - brains without beauty perhaps. While early religious writers like the Talmudists were already concerned about written style in the 10th century (they introduced words and ideas counts), it is only recently that psychologists have begun to look seriously at the effect of typographical design on readability - the effects of different type faces, for instance, line lengths and the amount of white space between lines of print. Now some of them are working with typographical designers on the design and layout of texts and jointly evaluating the results.

Many educational journals fall short of what Waller (1977), a typographical designer at the Open University, calls aesthetics and access. Many are visually dull - if not off-putting - a dense, unrelieved mass of lines of print. And I sometimes wonder if photographs of the journal's contributors do add to the aesthetic quality or not.

The access function also needs improving - this means devices for giving the reader easier access to the text, such as subheadings which clearly signal different sections of the article, glossaries where, for some reason, jargon seems inevitable, and informative titles. I remember one of my own: it was 'Short, Taught and Vulnerable' and I was congratulating myself on its succinct elegance when a professor of education remarked that while it was an excellent name for a firm of lawyers it fell somewhat short of an article describing the educational difficulties of short stature children. Information given in tables can be inaccessible too - when, for instance, it is spewed out in long columns without any grouping to help the eye. Ehrenberg (1977), among others, argues that most numbers can be reduced to two significant digits in their own context since most readers won't be able to remember longer ones, let alone add or subtract them by mental arithmetic.

I have mentioned some of the shortcomings of educational journals. Now what can be done to overcome them? Improvements are, of course, being made but I would suggest five sources from which more might come - psychologists, editors, publishers, contributors and teachers.

First, psychologists. Could psychologists set up experiments to compare readers' responses to journal material presented at varying levels of readability? Few have been done so far although there are, for instance, some interesting ones by Hartley (1974) at Keele University, who compared the effectiveness of two different typographical designs for the journal 'Programmed Learning and Educational Technology.' Experiments like this, if practicable, could be valuable in convincing editors and publishers of the need to look more critically at the readability of what they produce.

Next editors - including me. We need to brief our contributors more carefully about the content of their articles and its organisation. We also need to be translators from pudder to plain English. We need to be more knowledgeable about typographical design and to work more with typographical designers. We also need to study the success of other journals such as the weekly magazine Contact, distributed free and includes advertisements for jobs.

To do all this editors need to be convinced the effort is worthwhile - and they also need more time for the job.

Time usually means money, and this is where publishers come in. Hard evidence that more readable journals lead to increased sales might make them more willing to spend more money on producing journals. There is, I suspect, a tendency to think of journal readers as a race apart from newspaper readers. But some of the components of the success of the mass circulation newspapers might be relevant to journals too - though I wouldn't dare suggest that photographs of journal contributors should be unduly revealing.

Contributors might begin with reading the Bible - a verse from Corinthians 1. chapter 14 'Except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into air.' They could then go on to Plain Words or its equivalent, which should be obligatory reading before they sit down to write.

However, teachers as teachers must take some of the responsibility. Unless they encourage clear thought, clearly expressed, in their students, it is unlikely these qualities will develop at a later stage.

To summarise, I'm not saying that many educational journals are not doing a reasonable job already. I'm not saying that their impact may not stretch well beyond their readership figures. What I am saying is that, like the bright boy who is making paper darts at the back of the class, we could do much better.

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